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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000944

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ITALY: PIRATES RELEASE BUCCANEER CREW WITHOUT  
RANSOM PAYMENT

REF: ROME 00930

Classified By: Charge d'affaires Elizabeth Dibble for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On August 11, Poloff met with Massimiliano D'Antuono, Deputy Head of the MFA Crisis Unit, to discuss the details of the release of the MV Buccaneer crew which was taken hostage by pirates off the coast of Somalia. A Somali pirate is quoted in the press as saying that a four million euro ransom had been paid. This conflicts with Foreign Minister Frattini's statement that "Strong political work with local authorities as well as an Italian warship that was standing by with Special Forces finally made the pirates understand there was no other solution than to release the ship." D'Antuono affirmed that the hostage release was the result of diplomatic, military and intelligence efforts. He asserted that the Prime Minister of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia was instrumental in the negotiations with the pirates because of his family/clan/tribal links. End summary.

Background

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¶2. (C) On April 11, the deep water tugboat MV Buccaneer was slowly towing two large barges at 4-5 knots in the Gulf of Aden. Because it was moving too slowly to join a convoy, and because its rear deck was designed to be low to the water line, the crew of 10 Italians, 5 Romanians and 1 Croat was an easy target for Somali pirates. According to D'Antuono, a couple of hours after the ship was commandeered, one crew member was able to push a distress button calling for help. The ship's owner received an email from the Buccaneer with its location coordinates, but he correctly identified the message as a ruse because "the English used was better than anything the crew was capable of." The pirates were able to anchor the ship in a cove on the Somali coast. After 2-3 weeks, the Italian Navy ship San Giorgio arrived in the vicinity to take up a position approximately eight miles off the shore. Italian Special Forces, who arrived on the San Giorgio, routinely positioned themselves and their small boats in close proximity to the Buccaneer so that they could react within 20-30 seconds to an assault by the pirates on the hostages. D'Antuono implied the pirates knew the Special Forces had positioned themselves within striking distance even if they were not able to visibly locate them.

13. (C) The Crisis Unit worked under the direct supervision of the "highest levels" of the MFA to negotiate the hostages' release. D'Antuono described a "three-pillar approach using diplomatic, military and intelligence resources." He traveled to Somalia with Margherita Boniver, FM Frattini's Special Envoy for Humanitarian Emergencies, to leverage Italy's "special relationship" with Somalia and the GOI's current support for the TFG. Meetings with the TFG Prime Minister Sharmarke served to exert pressure on the pirates by virtue of family/clan/tribal relations. Asked for specifics, he demurred that "the Prime Minister was the one who made the release happen."

14. (C) D'Antuono emphasized that under Italian law, no ransom could be paid to release the sailors. He stated that the owner of one of the barges offered to pay a ransom, but was informed that proceeding with that course of action would result in prosecution by the Italian courts. In contrast to the barge owner's interactions with the GOI, he described the governments of Romania and Croatia, whose nationals were also being held captive, as being completely supportive of the GOI's lead role in the negotiations.

15. (C) Without discussing details, D'Antuono stated that at a certain point, the Special Forces from the San Giorgio were cleared to board the Buccaneer after all of the pirates had vacated the ship. The Special Forces took control of the ship and set sail with the crew to Djibouti. After a medical assessment in Djibouti, the crew flew to Italy where they will brief the prosecutor's office in Rome responsible for handling such cases for possible future action. D'Antuono believed the crew was treated reasonably well with the exception of a "beating of one of the Romanians" by the pirates. He mentioned that, at least once, the crew was taken ashore to offer relief from the cramped quarters of the ship.

16. (C) D'Antuono emphasized the GOI's aversion to resorting to a military operation because of the negative Italian public opinion that would likely follow any loss of life. He suggested that headlines describing fatherless children would have been a public relations disaster for the GOI, especially as the world focused its attention on Italy as the host of the G8 Summit in June.

Ransom Paid?

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17. (C) Andrew Mwangura, of the Mombasa-based East African Seafarer's Assistance Programme was quoted in the press as saying that the pirates received a four million euro ransom. Sometimes described as an intermediary between pirates and those who pay ransom, his role, if any, in the release of the Buccaneer crew is not clear. D'Antuono stated that the MFA is "familiar with" Mwangura, but dismissed his claims of a paid ransom as "a marketing technique." He reasoned that releasing a crew without receiving a ransom would set an unprofitable precedent. He assessed claims of having received a ransom as a necessary strategy to protect the economic value of the pirates' illicit activities.

18. (SBU) In terms of what the GOI did offer the TFG, if not the pirates, an MFA statement describes financial support in 2009 dedicated to "Somali institutions and to the peace process" totaling 13 million euros. Additional money has been disbursed through the Italian Development Cooperation. (see reftel)

Comment

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19. (C) The official line on the Buccaneer release is a substantial but incomplete accounting of factors that brought this situation to a peaceful conclusion. Gaining the release of the Italian vessel and hostages was a top priority, albeit

low profile effort, for the Italian government. Prime Minister Berlusconi himself reportedly made many of the early critical decisions. Italy, with U.S. assistance, moved quickly to ensure that it had a full range of options available to resolve the issue, including the strategic positioning of elite forces ready to engage in an extraction/rescue operation if necessary. These efforts were buttressed by Italy's re-energizing its relations with Somalia and engaging in a high profile "embrace" of its former colony. In spite of Italy's slashed overseas budget, it has dedicated significant development and humanitarian assistance to the TFG and announced its commitment to re-open an embassy in Mogadishu at the June 2009 International Contact Group on Somalia meeting held in Rome. A logical quid pro quo for Italy's new engagement was TFG action to resolve the hostage crisis. Adamant denials that Italy paid ransom, directly or otherwise, have been accompanied by claims of ignorance of TFG initiatives to liberate the hostages. The GOI was acutely aware of the strong USG opposition to the payment of ransom in this case and we believe that resulted in Italy relying heavily on the TFG to deliver its citizens.

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